

United Nations, Civil Society and Peace Soldiering

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29 May: International Day of Peacekeepers

On 29 May 1948, the first United Nations peacekeeping mission began operations with a group of unarmed military observers. In 2002, the United Nations General Assembly resolved to observe this day as the International Day of Peacekeepers, to pay tribute to all men and women who have served and continue to serve in UN peacekeeping operations for their high level of professionalism, dedication and courage, and to honor the memory of those who have lost their lives in the cause of peace.

In his message on the third observance of this Day in May 2005, the United Nations Secretary-General, honoring the sacrifice of UN peacekeepers from many lands, stated that the demand for UN peacekeeping was as high as it had ever been and with more missions deployed than ever before. He thanked the 103 Member States who contribute uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping, and expressed the hope that other countries, which had unique capacities to meet some of the specific needs of peacekeeping, would follow suit. “UN peacekeepers work every day to give practical meaning to the words of the United Nations Charter ‘to

save succeeding generations from the scourge of war', ” he stated.

The year 2004 saw an unprecedented surge in UN peacekeeping operations, widening prospects for ending conflicts and raising hopes for peace in war-torn countries; this has forced the UN Secretariat to develop new and innovative strategies. In his recent report to the UN General Assembly, titled *In Larger Freedom*, the Secretary-General pointed out that UN peacekeeping capacity was stretched to the limit. He called for Member States to create strategic reserves for UN peacekeeping, support the efforts of regional organizations to establish standby capacities as part of an interlocking system of peacekeeping capacities, and establish a United Nations civilian police standby capacity. He also called on all Member States to enact a policy of “zero tolerance” of sexual exploitation of minors and other vulnerable people in their national contingents, to match the policy he had put in place covering all personnel engaged in UN operations.

The UN sets out four principles which should guide decisions by the international community if peacekeeping is to succeed: avoiding UN engagement in hot wars; placing greater emphasis on partnerships; matching mandates with resources; and committing to see the job completed, i.e. until peace takes root. To prevent the recurrence of conflicts, peacekeeping must be backed by long-term peace-building and development activities. The UN engages in building peace, *inter alia*, through elections support; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and rehabilitation of ex-combatants;

restoring the rule of law and transitional justice for a stable society in states which are facing or emerging from conflict; and integrating gender issues into its activities.

Peacekeeping and Civil Society

Although peacekeeping operations face unique political, economic, social and security challenges, with different mandates, a key element in keeping and building peace and ensuring human security is partnerships -- of many kinds: among the UN and other organizations; civil and military cooperation; between peacekeepers, police and civilian staff; and, most importantly, with civil society and NGOs. Broadly speaking, “civil society” refers to the social and political sphere where voluntary associations attempt to shape norms and policies which affect public life.

This partnership is important not only during peacekeeping and peace-building, but also in maintaining peace and strengthening institutions and infrastructure. Civil and civilian components have a crucial role in the area of assisting the consolidation of a sustainable peace, a role praised by the Secretary-General not only in peacekeeping, but in the wide spectrum of international affairs.

Operating on the ground in unstable areas, engaged in early warning and analysis, civil society groups and NGOs are indispensable partners in peace and capacity-building by supporting humanitarian, reconstruction and development needs of war-affected societies. And civil

society is a powerful force for good governance, one of the best “keepers” of peace.